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### South Korea: Decriminalize abortion

#### *Court case could end risk of prison, recognize women's rights*

Human Rights Watch (23.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2s1HzzM> - Criminalization of abortion is incompatible with South Korea's human rights obligations, Human Rights Watch said today in an amicus brief to the Constitutional Court of Korea. The court will hear a case on May 24, 2018, involving the country's laws on abortion. The court should decriminalize abortion, and authorities should ensure that safe and legal abortion is accessible.

South Korea's laws provide that procuring or providing an abortion in most circumstances is a crime. A woman who undergoes an abortion risks a prison sentence of up to a year or a fine of up to 2 million won (US\$1,850). Healthcare workers who provide abortions can face up to two years in prison, though there are exceptions in cases of rape or incest if the pregnancy is between blood relatives who cannot marry legally, if continuing the pregnancy is likely to jeopardize the woman's health, or if the woman or her spouse has certain hereditary or communicable diseases. Married women must have their spouse's permission for an abortion.

"South Korean women are being denied reproductive choices that should be their right," said Liesl Gernholtz, women's rights director. "South Korea should remove all penalties for women who seek an abortion and their medical providers, and ensure access to safe, legal abortion."

International human rights treaties require governments to respect women's reproductive and other human rights. Authoritative interpretations of these treaties by United Nations experts have said that governments should eliminate criminal penalties for abortion and take steps to ensure that legal abortion is accessible. The experts also have said that other barriers to abortion should be removed, including requirements for spousal consent.

The criminalization of abortion in South Korea negatively affects many human rights, Human Rights Watch said. The amicus brief to the Constitutional Court analyzes its impact on women's rights to life, health, nondiscrimination and equality, privacy, information, and freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, as well as the right to decide the number and spacing of their children.

UN human rights bodies and experts have criticized South Korea's punitive restrictions on abortion and have urged the government to modify these laws. In December 2017, a report by the UN working group on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of human rights conditions for South Korea said that it should "[r]espect reproductive rights of women, which include decriminalization of abortions" and "[r]emove all penalties for women who seek abortion, and for doctors and other medical personnel involved in providing these services."

In March 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women urged South Korea to "legalize abortion in cases of rape, incest, threats to the life and/or health of the pregnant woman, or severe fetal impairment, and to decriminalize it in all

other cases, remove punitive measures for women who undergo abortion, and provide women with access to quality post-abortion care, especially in cases of complications resulting from unsafe abortions." The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) made similar recommendations in 2017, as did the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 2012.

Unsafe abortions pose a grave threat to the health of women and girls. According to a 2017 report by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Guttmacher Institute, 25 million unsafe abortions occurred every year between 2010 and 2014. The WHO has noted that the removal of restrictions on abortion results in reduction of maternal mortality.

"South Korea's Constitutional Court should protect women's health and safety by ruling in accordance with international law," Gertholtz said. "Decisions about abortion belong to a pregnant woman, without penalty or interference by the government or anyone else."

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